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ABSTRACT

Reported in this paper are results from two studies undertaken to explore the impact of parental age on childrearing practices. The first study involved administering the Child Rearing Practices Report to 65 adult participants, then asking the participants to describe their parents' childrearing attitudes. Results suggest that those respondents who were born to parents age 33 or older perceived their parents as being warmer and less likely to adhere to stereotypical parental roles. The second study provided for a secondary analysis of observational data collected in the homes of 52 families. Multiple regression analyses indicated that parental age effects are more apparent for mothers than for fathers and that women who are older when their children are born maintain higher levels of interaction with those children and are more positively disposed toward them. Further research to explore the timing of parenthood from the parents' perspective is recommended. In addition, the possibility that delayed parenthood may represent an adaptive mechanism for coping with a depressed economic climate is discussed. (Author/MP)

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Shifting Emphasis From Parental Youth to Parental Age In Studies of the Timing of Parenthood: Rationale, Research Findings, and Recommendations*

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ABSTRACT

The trend toward delayed parenthood, coupled with the virtual neglect of older parents in studies of the timing of parenthood, provides a rationale for shifting emphasis to parental age in research on parenting. Findings of two empirical studies are presented. The first involved administering the Child Rearing Practices Report to 65 adults and asking them to describe their parents' childrearing attitudes. Results suggest that those respondents who were born when their parents were age 33 or older perceived their parents as being warmer and less likely to adhere to stereotypic parental roles. The second study was a secondary analysis of observational data collected in the homes of 52 families. Multiple regression analyses indicate that parental age effects are more apparent for mothers than for fathers. Women who are older when their children are born maintain higher levels of interaction with those children and are more positively disposed toward them. Further research to explore the timing of parenthood from the parent's perspective is recommended. In addition, the possibility that delayed parenthood may represent an adaptive mechanism for coping with a depressed economic climate is discussed.

Shifting Emphasis From Parental Youth to Parental Age
In Studies of the Timing of Parenthood:
Rationale, Research Findings, and Recommendations

In their efforts to understand the nature of the parent-child relationship and its effect on child development, family researchers have identified parental age as one variable of interest. They have examined this concept, however, within a limited context. Nearly all studies of the effects of parental age compare adolescent parents with those who give birth in their twenties (e.g. Moore & Hofferth, 1978; Phillibar & Graham, 1981). The emphasis has been placed on parental "youth" rather than parental "age" in studies of the timing of parenthood. Merely for the sake of comprehensiveness, then, family researchers should give attention to parents who are older when their children are born.

The limited context within which researchers have considered effects of parental age appears not only with regard to its use as an independent variable, but extends also to the dependent variables it has been used to predict. That is, age of parent has usually been looked at in terms of how it influences child development. Falbo and Richman (1978) measured achievement motivation among college-aged sons and found a significant negative relationship between father's age and need for achievement. A similar tactic was used in a study which looked at the effect of maternal age on intelligence test scores of sons (Zybert, Stein & Belmont, 1978). Their finding of a positive correlation between maternal age at birth and subsequent intellectual ability of sons is consistent with the assumption that age of parent should be included as a research variable because of its potential impact on child development.

An alternative to focusing on the <u>outcome</u> of parenting is to consider how parental age might influence the <u>process</u> of parenting. That is, given the evidence, albeit scant, that parental age has consequences for a child

it becomes important to consider the mechanisms involved. What are the parental behaviors associated with age which might ultimately lead to differences among children in developmental outcomes such as levels of achievement motivation and intelligence? This attention to parenting behavior is important not only for explaining child-related outcomes of parental age, but also for contributing to our knowledge of parenthood from the perspective of the parent. Nydegger (1973) addressed this latter age issue among fathers and found that earlier fathering was associated with greater role strain, while later fathers were more "easy" and "composed" with respect to the paternal role and showed less acceptance of stereptypical parental roles. Younger fathers saw themselves as mentors for their children, whereas older fathers regarded themselves as benevolent overseers.

It seems particularly important to focus attention on older parenting in view of current trends in family planning. More women are postponing motherhood, birth rates for women in their late twenties and early thirties are increasing (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980a), and the mean age of childbearing is expected to continue to increase (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977). Between 1975 and 1979 there was a 9% increase in the number of births to women ages 35-39 and a 26% increase in births among 30-34-year-old women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980b). Advances in medical technology have made it physically possible for more women to have children later in life if they choose to do so. The women's movement and consequent emphasis on careers for women has made delaying motherhood desirable for many women in order to be able to pursue their educations and establish careers (Hoffman, 1977). Furthermore, children now represent more of an economic liability than ever before. The cost of raising a child from birth to age 18 has reached nearly $80,000 in 1980 dollars (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1981). Many couples may choose to postpone

having children until they have had time to build a strong financial foundation. Indeed, couples who delay parenthood are most likely to cite economic motives, such as saving for a house, as the reason (Young, 1977). Finally, the prevalence of divorce, particularly among young couples (Glick, 1980) and ensuing second marriages may result in a tendency to bear children later in life as part of establishing a second family.

The increasing incidence of later parenthood, coupled with the dearth of empirical research into its consequences, should provide sufficient rationale for shifting our emphasis from parental youth to parental age in research on the timing of parenthood. Yet, a third line of evidence can strengthen the argument. A review of popular literature reveals that over the past six years 16 magazine articles dealing with delayed parenthood have appeared (see Appendix A). In addition, at least one book on the subject has been published. All of these pieces are based on personal accounts, journalisitc impressions, and/or medical opinions. In contrast, only one empirical study of older parents has been published in a professional journal (cf., Zybert, Stein & Belmont, 1978). This suggests that the general public wants to know about the consequences of delayed parenthood and that family researchers are doing an inadequate job of meeting this information need. Those of us who believe that the ultimate purpose of research is to enhance the well-being of the population should gear our scientific endeavors to fit the interests of our constituents. This argument is particularly cogent in light of current funding cuts which will require us to justify our activities.

Given the above rationale, the present author has undertaken research to identify childrearing practices associated with parental age. Results of two separate studies will be presented. In the first study (Richardson & Hartley, 1980), 65 adults selected for age, sex, ordinal position, and their

parents' age and socioeconomic status completed a Child Rearing Practices Report (Block, 1965). This instrument, which consists of 91 statements appropriate for the description of both maternal and paternal childrearing attitudes and values was administered as a Q-sort. Subjects sorted the cards on a scale from 1 (most undescriptive) to 7 (most descriptive) based on how characteristic each statement was of the subject's interactions with his or her parents as a child of elementary school age. Sample items are statements such as "My mother believed that children should be seen and not heard", or "My mother took my preferences into account in making plans for the family."

Respondents' ratings of their parents' childrearing practices were used to look for differences between older parents (age 33 or older when respondent was born) and younger parents (under age 33 when respondent was born). Multiple analyses of variance revealed that older parents were more likely than younger parents to be described as warm and indulgent with their children ($F(1,54)=5.03$, $p \leq .03$). In addition, older parents were seen as adhering less to stereotypic parental roles ($F(1,54)=3.91$, $p \leq .05$). Older parents also appeared to be less likely to use physical punishment, although this trend was not statistically significant. These findings support the conclusion that the trend toward later parenthood will be accompanied by changes in childrearing practices.

A second study used in-home observational data to further explore the impact of parental age on parental behavior and to corroborate the above findings with a more valid measurement instrument. The data were originally collected for a study of abusive, neglectful, and normal families (Burgess & Conger, 1978). In-home observations of 52 families were conducted to obtain rates (recorded as mean response rates per minute) of maternal and paternal

behavior within each mother-child and father-child dyad. Families were observed during four different 1½ hour sessions in which they were given construction, skill, and discussion tasks to engage in. Along with mere quantity of behavior, rates also reflect the quality of the attention directed by the parent to the child. A behavior was scored as positive if it indicated verbal or physical liking, approval, or support of the child's actions, characteristics or possessions. To be scored as negative, a behavior had to include a statement or physical demonstration that indicated dislike, disapproval, or lack of support of the child's actions, characteristics or possessions.

Recognizing that any parental age effects might be attenuated or amplified by other factors, child age and birth order, family size and density, as well as parent age and parent-child age difference were included as independent variables in this study. A series of multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the importance of parental age in predicting the quantity and quality of attention directed by a parent to any given child. Additionally, the nature of the data set allowed consideration of whether being an older parent is differentially important in abusive, neglectful, and normal families.

Results indicate that the timing of parenthood does have an impact on subsequent parental behavior. This parental age effect is most apparent for mothers while only minimally and insignificantly present in the data for fathers. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, it appears that maternal age is negatively associated with the quantity of both verbal behavior and physical behavior that a mother directs to her child. The results presented in Table 2

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

indicate that this trend is modified, however, if there is a large age difference between mother and child. Mothers who have their children at a later

age show less of a decrease in behavior with age than do mothers who are younger when their children are born. Perhaps more important is the finding, presented in Table 3, that being an older mother is significantly related to higher relative rates of positive attention from mother to child. That is,

Insert Table 3 about here

of all maternal behavior directed toward a child, a greater proportion of that behavior is positive if the mother is an older parent. Thus, the conclusion from these analyses seems to be that a mother who gives birth to a child at a later age maintains a higher and more positive level of interaction with that child even when she is older. Later motherhood results in a more positive disposition toward one's children. Results within each of the three family types show that these findings are most pervasive among control families, only minimally present in abusive families, and completely absent in neglectful families.

On the basis of the above discussion, several recommendations can be offered. One is that the issue of older parenting is worthy of consideration by family researchers. Work on this topic promises to be both timely and fruitful. The studies reported here have only begun to assess the impact of delayed parenthood on the parent-child relationship. Furthermore, we need to investigate the timing of parenthood from the parent's perspective. There has been some speculation that couples who have a child at a relatively older age will, throughout the childrearing years, be out of phase with their age peers (Rindfuss & Bumpass, 1976). They will thus lose an important source of advice and support in the childrearing process. On the more positive side, however, these same parents will be under less pressure to have more children and will usually end up with smaller families (Rindfuss & Bumpass, 1976).

Along with pursuing further research, we need to consider practical implications of older parenting. Delayed parenthood may represent an adaptive mechanism for coping with a depressed economic climate. By allowing both husband and wife to spend more time in the labor force, it increases the financial assets a couple has when they enter parenthood. Postponing parenthood inherently decreases the number of years available for childbearing, which results in fewer children and ultimately fewer economic demands within the family. In addition, the trend toward later parenthood may indicate that more women are choosing a sequential approach to work-family involvement whereby they alternate participation in work and family roles across the life cycle (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982). This role sequencing may have the advantage of shifting the stages in the work-family life cycles, which in turn may reduce some of the traditional role demands on women performing work and family roles. If a woman has reached the "middle career" stage of the work life cycle before her first child is born, the economic pressures and role demands which confront most working mothers will be reduced (Voydanoff, 1980). Finally, other implications of the trend toward older parenthood might include a need to develop support systems for older parents, as well as a recognition that delaying parenthood may be one way of preventing dysfunctional parenting.

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Table 1

Mothers' Verbal Contacts (All Affect)
With Children

Predictor	Slope[@]	R^2
All Families		
par age	-.018***	.11
fam size	-.076***	
Control Families		
fam size	-.104*	.04
Abuse Families		
par age	-.035***	.18
spacing	-.084***	
Neglect Families		
par age	-.02**	.11
fam size	-.089*	

@ standardized partial regression coefficient

* $p \leq .10$

** $p \leq .05$

*** $p \leq .01$

Table 2

Mothers' Physical Contacts (All Affect) With Children

Predictor	Slope[@]	R^2
All Families		
fam size	-.038***	.28
p-c diff	.006***	
par age	-.008***	
spacing	.016**	
Control Families		
p-c diff	.018***	.45
fam size	-.067***	
par age	-.012**	
spacing	-.028*	
Abuse Families		
spacing	.024***	.3[illegible]
par age	-.008***	
ch age	-.003***	
Neglect Families		
ch age	-.007***	.28
fam size	-.038**	

[@] standardized partial regression coefficient

* $p \leq .10$

** $p < .05$

*** $p \leq .01$

Table 3

Mothers' Relative Rates of Positive Contacts With Children

Predictor	Slope[@]	R^2
All Families		
p-c diff	.007***	.14
par age	-.008***	
fam size	-.029*	
Control Families		
p-c diff	.014***	.35
fam size	-.069***	
Abuse Families		
par age	-.014***	.13
p-c diff	.008**	
Neglect Families		
ch age	-.005**	.07

[@] standardized partial regression coefficient

* $p \leq .10$

** $p \leq .05$

*** $p \leq .01$

Appendix A

Popular Magazine Articles Dealing with Older Parenthood

Doctor, am I too old to have a baby? Good Housekeeping. December, 1977, p. 72.

Motherhood after thirty: When later is better. Parents Magazine. October, 1978, p. 75.

Childbirth after 30: Excerpt from "You're not too old to have a baby." Harper's Bazaar. September, 1979, p. 231.

Childbirth after 40. Harper's Bazaar. October, 1980, p. 192.

Childbirth at 40: Elizabeth Bing's own story. Parents Magazine. January, 1980, p. 96.

Overrated joys of motherhood after 30. McCall's. March, 1980, p. 202.

Was I too old to have another baby? Ladies Home Journal. April, 1980, p. 20.

How old is too old to have a baby? McCall's. June, 1980, p. 91.

Mothering after 30. Essence. May, 1981, p. 86.

Should women have babies after 35? Ebony. July, 1981, p. 36.

Childbirth after 40. Harper's Bazaar. September, 1981, p. 101.

The medical risks of waiting. Time. February 22, 1982, p. 58.

Mommy's 39, daddy's 57 - and baby was just born. New York. April 5, 1982, p. 28.

Babies after 30: A new look at the odds. Good Housekeeping. June, 1982, p. 276.

The latest on late pregnancy. Vogue. June, 1982, p. 217.

Postponed parenthood: What's at stake. Business Week. August 2, 1982, p. 74.

You're Not Too Old To Have A Baby, by Jane Price. Copyright 1977 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.